DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 177 490 CS 005 026

AUTHOR Cook, Wanda Dauksza
TITLE An Overview of Literacy Education in the United States.
PUB DATE Apr 79
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the White House Conference on Libraries and Information Services (Reston, Virginia, April 1-4, 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Basic Education; *Adult Education Programs; *Adult Literacy; Federal Legislation; *Functional Illiteracy; *Illiterate Adults; Literacy; *Literacy Education

ABSTRACT

Emphasis on adult literacy education in the United States began in the first decade of the twentieth century, which was characterized by heavy immigration from countries whose populations were not uniformly educated. Special attention was paid to adult literacy during times of crisis such as World War I and II when it was learned that many adults had difficulty reading and writing. While early programs relied heavily on volunteer teachers, the literacy education programs of the fifties and sixties (a period of increased federal legislation concerning adult literacy) hired and trained professionals. While the numbers of illiterates has decreased, the problem now is one of functionally illiterate adults who cannot read well enough to participate in society. (MKM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED177490

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

AN OVERVIEW OF LITERACY EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES

by

Wanda Dauksza Cook

Department of Education

Westfield State College

Westfield, Massachusetts

Theme Conference on Libraries and Literacy

White House Conference on Libraries and Information Services

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Wanda Dauksza Cook

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Washington, D. C.
April 1, 1979

Conference draft for comment only. Not for Citation.

CS 605024

The problem of illiteracy is one which is basic to all countries, whether they are prosperous, emerging or underdeveloped. It is true that, in recent years, illiteracy figures in the United States have shown steady improvement; but it is only during the past decade that the true burden of illiteracy has been fully realized.

The ultimate demands made of man in growing and changing societies show progress to be inadequate in many instances. Without basic literacy skills, countless people are forced to live their lives in proverty. Often they are without adequate housing, food, or health care and are unable to participate fully in society. Furthermore, many leave illiteracy as a legacy for their children.

Here, then, is an attempt to set forth the various phases through which American literacy education has passed. One will note the federal government's concern with the problem surfaces mainly during times of national conflict. The history is one characterized by individual efforts implemented by state and local governments in a patchwork pattern.

The first decade of the twentieth century was characterized by heavy immigration. New immigrants were met with suspicion, prejudice, and disdain by native born Americans and "old immigrants." Since the new immigrants were mainly from less uniformly educated countries, they added to the already sizeable illiteracy problem in the United States.

The public generally displayed a lack of concern about illiteracy. The few attempts at literacy education were directed mainly at the immigrant segment of the population and the motivation for these classes was often less than noble.

Lack of uniform legislation and the mobility of the people hindered the few local efforts to educate the illiterate adult. Some states, such as New York, aimed at preventing adult illiteracy by placing the emphasis on educating the child.

One of the few attempts to study the problem of illiteracy took place in Passaic, New Jersey. The study resulted in a list of suggestions to the State Department of Education. In the years to follow, these results would be rediscovered many times over, but it would be many years before anything significant would be done about the problem.

And so with a few isolated comments and efforts, the history of adult literacy education started its evolution.

The period from 1910 to 1919 was one of fluctuating interests and motivations. The spirit of reform brought with it the first efforts directed toward educating native born illiterates. Distrust of foreigners stimulated efforts toward Americanization, and the great numbers of illiterate soldiers motivated the concern of the federal government.

Motivated by the establishment of the moonlight schools in Kentucky, groups worked to establish illiteracy commissions. The concept spread rapidly from state to state but, for most of the decade, was hampered by lack of funds.

Slowly, local legislation attempting to solve the problem began to appear. It varied in form from restricting the number of immigrants to providing teachers for illiterates. The attempts to provide legislation were often fought bitterly on both sides.

For the most part, the illiteracy problem was left to local talent. The federal government did display concern when the draft records revealed alarming numbers of illiterates at a national level, but it was basically the local governments that attacked the problem in its new form. With this new effort, the movement against illiteracy continued, assured that "adult illiteracy in the United States is doomed. A few years more and there will not be a vestige of it left" (261:12).

For the major portion of the twenties the people of the United States experienced economic good times. Employment was high, credit easy to obtain, and modern conveniences produced leisure time.

Fear about Communism and the experiences during World War I resulted in a desire on the part of the people to be isolated. These experiences revealed themselves more concretely in the anti-foreign born attitudes and the fear that foreign ideas were radical ideas. Perhaps all these conditions explain, to some degree, why this was such a rapidly moving and changing period.

The federal government's concern for the illiterate was displayed in its numerous publications which offered professional advice to those interested in the problem. Activity at a state level was even more intense and implemented with state aid and special teachers.

Professional groups and organizations were particularly active in making contributions to literacy education. Literacy campaigns were stimulated by committees, the National Education Association reorganized in order to accommodate supervisors and teachers of native illiterates, and a National Illiteracy

Conference was conducted. The conference may well have been the stimulus for a National Illiteracy Crusade organized in 1924.

At the close of the decade, President Hoover appointed an Advisory Committee on National Illiteracy. Its purpose was to collect facts and make suggestions for the Committee on Education. This was the first national committee to be formed for such a purpose.

The period, then, was one of yet uncoordinated projects and efforts with some attempt to share ideas and knowledge. The economic conditions made it possible for people to have time for and interest in the more hidden problems of the day. But a depression followed soon and the enthusiasm of crusaders, educators, and a concerned public was directed toward more immediate problems than illiteracy.

When Franklin D. Roosevelt entered office in 1933, the country was experiencing the full shock of the depression. During his administration, Roosevelt greatly extended the powers of the Executive Branch of the government and initiated controversial programs--all of which aroused intense feelings in the public.

States continued to develop illiteracy commissions but at a much slower pace than during the twenties. In some instances, the state even appropriated funds for this purpose. Federal programs involving illiterates were designed primarily to provide work relief. In the course of their operation, however, educational opportunities were provided for illiterates. The Work Relief in Education Project in New York City was an example of this type of program. Literacy classes were conducted through the Federal Emergency Relief Administration in hundreds of communities throughout the United States. Finally, the Civilian Conservation Corps--originally designed to provide work for young men--extended its educational program to include basic elementary education instruction for those who wished to participate.

The professional educator became more aware of his responsibilities during the thirties as evidenced in the following manner. First of all, criteria used to define an illiterate were questioned and suggestions were made for more stringent criteria. The success of these pressures would be evidenced in the forties.

Second, the basic problems involved in teaching illiterate adults were not yet solved. Initial efforts at research attempted to evaluate and answer some of these questions. The Advisory Committee on National Literacy also completed several investigations related to the illiteracy problem. Finally, many educators

became active in producing the instructional materials needed by their students.

By the end of the period, it was fairly evident that campaigns conducted by volunteers were not adequate in solving the illiteracy problem; professional help was needed. The transition from volunteers to professional educators would not be immediate. With the war in Europe and the participation of the United States in it, one could almost foresee what would happen. The tremendous drain on manpower and the rapid training of draftees and volunteers would reveal that the problem of illiteracy had been discussed, but not conquered. The next few years would find much of the literacy training shifting from civilians to the military.

During the forties, the United States again became concerned with the thousands of illiterate registrants called for World War II. As a result, efforts along the literacy fronts were mainly in the form of military programs as the armed forces undertook to rapidly train these illiterates in the basic skills of reading and writing.

For the first time, there was an abundance of materials designed specifically for teaching adults. The materials were produced mainly for use in the military environment, however, and not for civilian life. These readers, workbooks, filmstrips, and magazines were the forerunners of civilian materials published some years later.

Since most efforts were being directed toward the war and war needs, little appears to have been done along professional lines. The only notable civilian effort during the period was the Project for Adult Education of Negroes, sponsored by the Carnegie Corporation. As a result of the program, a number of instructional materials and teaching aids were produced, and approximately 1,000 teachers were trained in new methods and techniques of literacy education.

Although there were no really great contributions to literacy education during the forties, the war did create an awareness of the problem. Military leaders, political figures, and educators were beginning to realize the task of educating the illiterate adult could not be left to the amateur and volunteer. Neither could it be left to chance and corrected if necessity required it. The forties, then, can be described as an incubation period for the ideas that would emerge concretely in the next twenty years.

The decade of the fifties was a period of adjustment in many phases of American life. The United States was initially involved in a cold war with Communist forces and later in actual military action. The economic situation vacillated between good times and recessions, and the country was troubled with fear of internal Communism. It was also a period of adjustment educationally. A Supreme Court decision declared separate educational facilities unequal, and the difficult task of desegregation began. Interest in science and school curriculums was stimulated in 1957 when the Russians launched the first satellite.

The statistics for illiteracy were lower in 1950 than ever before, but a new problem had arisen. By midcentury, the early definitions for literacy were no longer suitable and the term functional illiterate came into use. Though the percentage of illiterates had dropped, the number of people who could not function in society had increased, and might well continue to increase as educational demands became greater. The draft calls during the Korean encounter confirmed this fact.

By the late fifties most states had laws pertaining to adult elementary education, but there was no federal legislation to coordinate efforts. Programs were still being conducted at the local and state levels. In Memphis, Tennessee, an attempt was made to teach illiterates by using televised lessons. The project made use of the Laubach Method, an approach which gained popularity at the time.

Professional progress was made at Baylor University with a program was designed to train literacy volunteers. Baylor also created the first undergraduate cirriculum for literacy specialists. At Syracuse University a curriculum was designed for training students in literacy journalism.

Finally, in an attempt to create interest in the problem and produce action, the National Commission for Adult Literacy was created. It was the hope of this body that governments at all levels would help solve the illiteracy problem. Just how effective this organization was would be evident in the sixties.

The election of John F. Kennedy in 1960 ushered in a decade of self-evaluation. With a critical eye, the nation began to view its international position and its national social problems.

In an attempt to cement good international relations, the Peace Corps and several other programs were established to provide for underdeveloped countries. It was during this time that the United States initially became involved in the Far East in an effort to stop the spread of Communism.

The domestic problems faced by the United States during the sixties were overwhelming. The black revolution was expanding rapidly, and often in a violent manner. As the blacks became more impatient, so did the white opposition. Large poverty pockets were discovered, and they seemed to grow as unemployment threatened more people. Many were concerned that the United States was falling behind as a leader in scientific development.

The situation was not without some hope. An active Congress during the mid-sixties produced such key legislation as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Economic Opportunity Act. They also passed bills providing for tax reduction, medical care for the aged, and rent subsidy. Several major advances took place in adult literacy education during the same time. Probably more was accomplished during this decade than in all the preceding fifty years.

It was during this period that functional illiteracy was recognized as a problem of prominent concern. Although the percentage of absolute illiterates dropped to a new low, the number of functionally illiterate adults increased at an amazing rate. The increase in the number of functional illiterates was probably the result of redefining the term. It was no longer reasonable to consider a fifth grade education adequate for full participation in today's society. When the standard was raised, it was natural that the number of functional illiterates would increase.

For years, local and state programs had attempted to deal with the illiteracy problem with very little significant success. Lack of funds, sporadic attempts, and inadequate teachers and materials hindered progress. Events of the sixties, however, changed the picture. For the first time active participation of the federal government yielded legislation backed with financial support. It was now possible to carry out extensive programs, train teachers, and prepare materials.

Soon there was a lucrative market for adult literacy materials. Materials of the early sixties were enthusiastically received, but they lacked the quality and sophistication of the materials produced later in the decade. By the end of the sixties, instructional materials were so numerous that extensive bibliographies were compiled and distributed to literacy educators.

Along with the new materials came a new idea in literacy education. The curriculum shifted from reading, writing, and arithmetic to a more diverse one. The adult basic education class replaced the standard literacy class. A new

curriculum was designed to provide the student with the basic literacy skills along with those skills needed to function in a modern society.

Attempts were made to train the needed literacy specialists. In addition to programs offered at universities, there were teacher training institutes supported by federal grants and private foundations. Professional books began to emerge and new avenues of the illiteracy problems were investigated. It appears that the sixties may have been a significant step toward the first sustained and continuous effort in literacy education. Only the next decade will confirm this or declare the period as just another sporadic attempt to be recorded in an already patchwork history.

A great deal was learned about literacy education during the sixties. In fact, more was learned than in the total sixty years preceding that decade. The seventies now have the potential of using what has been learned and making significant progress.

Legislation is providing the financial backing needed to carry on such an extensive project. These funds are being directed toward research, teacher training, developing materials and leadership, and providing resources. No area of literacy education need be neglected during the present decade. This includes unifying existing programs. There is an effort to coordinate all the literacy activities throughout the country, an important step which is vital to the success of future literacy plans.

Publishers are providing a variety and abundance of good teaching materials. Low level materials designed to interest and teach the adult are available at reasonable prices. They cover areas which range from vocational topics to health and safety in the home. There is now something for everyone.

Finally, the educator is recognizing his professional responsibility. He is studying the resources available to him and is making better use of them. Attempts to establish a clearinghouse to share ideas on literacy education may soon yield tangible results. Also, with his background and experience, the adult educator can help train qualified personnel for literacy education.

This decade has the potential of becoming the most significant period in the history of literacy education. With strong and informed leaders, financial support, and sustained interest, adult literacy education has a chance of becoming an integral part of the educational system. Only time will tell if we are ready to enter this new era.

If, indeed, we learn from the past, this history of adult literacy education should provide direction for the future. All history is subject to interpretation and the history of literacy education is no exception. In an effort to maintain historical accuracy, however, the author has refrained from personal commentary until now.

At this point, an important question remains: Do we, as a nation, realize the seriousness and extent of illiteracy and, if so, how shall we go about dealing with this problem in the future? History tells us that we have realized the seriousness of illiteracy on many occasions in the past. In most instances, it was called to attention because of commonly shared crises. The attention given to illiteracy programs during World War I and World War II is an excellent illustration of this awareness. Currently, literacy awareness is displayed through legislation which is being proposed and passed by Congress. However, there has never been a sustained and continuous effort made in this direction. Unless there is, success will always be elusive.

Before a problem can be solved, it must be clearly identified. In literacy education one starts by defining the terms illiterate and adult. An illiterate has been described in the past by his inability to write his name, his inability to read and write a simple message in English, or by the grade level he has failed to complete. In some instances, grade achievement was the measure of literacy. More recently the concept has taken on a broader interpretation as in the Harris Study and the Adult Performance Level Study. In these instances, literacy was viewed in terms of life related tasks.

The definition must be demanding enough to allow a person to function comfortably in today's society and yet realistic enough to be achieved by most people. It must be a flexible definition which allows for change as society changes and makes different demands on its people. It may make use of grade level, life related tasks, performance on literacy tests, or any combination of these factors.

As was the case with the term illiterate, the term adult is one which has had many definitions. In the past, an adult could have been a person of age ten, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, eighteen, twenty, or even twenty-five. A sound rationale should be developed and a basic age established for an adult. Although defining adult is much simpler than defining illiterate, the task is no less important.

Once the area of definition has common agreement, the possibilities are limitless for literacy research. At an interdisciplinary conference held at the Center for Applied Linguistics in 1964, organization and administration were identified as areas in literacy education needing research and these topics still are timely. More recently, Spaulding indicated the need for longitudinal studies as opposed to point in time studies.

Many federal programs have made provisions for such research. This is a step forward, but it represents only a beginning. There is a need to develop a systematic and organized body of research which would permeate all areas of literacy education.

Once a topic has been investigated at a certain level or stage and the findings confirmed in other settings, there is a responsibility on the part of educators to base their actions upon the research. The results give direction for new research and modifications and improvements of old theories and practices. Ignoring the research findings is ignoring professional responsibility.

In the future, programs, methods, and materials need to be geared more toward the individual and his respective needs and goals. Thus, there will be many different kinds of ABE programs, depending on the populus served. Great variations might exist between the structure of an ABE program designed for an urban setting and one designed for a rural area.

Once a program is in operation, the vehicle for carrying the needed literacy skills to the individual is diagnostic-prescriptive teaching. The important prerequisite for this type of teaching is a well trained ABE teacher. This training might take the form of inservice education, summer teacher training institutes, or preservice courses. Whatever form is used, the training is essential to carry out successful diagnostic-prescriptive teaching.

In the past, literacy programs have appeared and disappeared as crises, funds, or interest fluctuated. This is not good enough for the future. If ABE programs are to be truly effective, they must become a permanent and integral part of the existing educational system. Such a relationship will provide for the continuity of programs, which is essential if significant literacy progress is to be made.

No single solution to the problem of illiteracy exists, only avenues to investigate and probe. Some of these have been mentioned: common working definitions, research, techniques, and the structure of the educational system. There is, however, still another problem which has been identified and discussed in the past and yet remains neglected. This is the area of attitude and motivation.

From time to time, reports from projects and research mention the attitudes of participants in the final summaries. These summaries often include incidental phrases and statements which reflect the lack of interest and enthusiasm the adult learner demonstrates.

The television studies have consistencly reported a problem in motivating the adult to take advantage of such learning opportunities. Studies using monetary rewards for the learner have demonstrated that many adult students operate at an extrinsic motivational level. This level is the most elemental and is more easily destroyed by outside factors.

In his extensive study of Army illiterates, Goldberg addressed the problem of motivation. In most civilian situations he indicated that the illiterate does not see the benefit in learning to read and write. Consequently, there is not desire to learn.

Years after Goldberg made this observation, it was illustrated with alarming clarity in Cook County, Illinois. The Welfare Administration and the Board of Education set up an educational program designed for relief recipients who lacked literacy skills. Those receiving relief assistance were required to attend classes if they lacked reading skills. If they did not attend, they would forfeit their money. With 270,000 people on relief, only 7,000 joined the program. The undereducated did not want to learn.

Attitude, then, is the hidden variable of the literacy problem. At times it is an almost imperceptible factor and yet it is ever present. It is this factor which will determine the ultimate success or failure of literacy programs, for there is no program nor legislation that can force a person to learn if he does not want to learn. Attitude is the very core of the problem and the factor which is virtually impossible for educators to control.

Millions of Americans will remain functionally illiterate by choice and their children may grow up assimilating this same indifference. If the idea sounds disturbing, it should.

With these facts in mind, there are two directions which must be followed. First, opportunities for learning should not be denied to those adults who are motivated and want to move away from illiteracy. The suggestions made earlier show what avenues need to be pursued in order to provide effective programs for these people.

Next, it must be acknowledged that there is a large group of adults who will not be reached. Recognition of this fact provides the second direction. We, as a nation, must commit ourselves to preventative measures and focus our attention on elementary and secondary schools. Only when we concentrate on producing literate students can we hope to affect the statistics.

This means that all teachers, at both elementary and secondary levels, must be well trained in the area of reading. The curriculum needs to actively emphasize the literacy skills from the primary grades through high school. Finally, we must institute a minimal reading achievement level as part of graduation requirements. We must devote our time, energy, money, and expertise to this end.

There is no absolute formula for the future, but the key idea is not the elimination of illiteracy; rather it is the prevention of illiteracy.

Cook, Wanda Dauksza. Adult Literacy Education in the United States. Neward, Delaware: International Reading Association, 1977.